BOOK REVIEW

*The Education of a Coach*

288 pages, $14 paperback

Reviewed by Wade Gilbert, Fresno State University, Fresno, Calif.

**The Education of a Coach**

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and best-selling author David Halberstam provides a compelling life history of New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick and the critical roles that his parents and other coaches played in his development as a coach. Published seven years ago, this book is perhaps the most detailed account of using the deliberate practice process to become an effective sport coach.

The book portrays, in great detail, the chronological development of Belichick as a legendary football coach whose teams have participated in five NFL Super Bowl championship games (3 victories).

The way in which Halberstam describes Belichick’s development as a coach actually fits quite well with the stages of talent development described by Benjamin Bloom in his seminal 1985 book, *Developing Talent in Young People*. Bloom identified four distinct stages of talent development: pre-formal years, early years, middle years and later years. Although Halberstam makes no formal connection to talent-development theories, the way he describes Belichick’s development as a coach fits nicely within this four-stage framework.

In the pre-formal years, or early home life, Belichick’s father and mother both helped pave his path to becoming an effective coach. His father, Steve Belichick, was a legendary football scout who also coached at the college level. Halberstam makes a case for that early exposure to football coaching exerting a strong influence on Belichick’s desire to become a coach. But in the pre-formal years up to age 6 or 7, it could be argued that Belichick’s development as a coach was influenced more by his mother, Jeannette Belichick. Jeannette was highly educated and was considered an exceptional teacher. Halberstam attributes Belichick’s skill at teaching and his astonishing attention to detail to Jeannette Belichick.

Another way in which Belichick’s mother might have shaped his approach to coaching was her commitment to ongoing learning. Although she did not know much about football when she met her husband, Jeannette took it upon herself to learn the game and eventually even helped her husband scout games. One can deduce, then, that Belichick’s early home life was designed perfectly for both inspiring him to consider a career in coaching and also for helping him learn the skills and attitudes that later would become hallmarks of his coaching.
Moving on to the early years of Belichick’s development as a coach, Halberstam notes that Belichick started “practicing” coaching in earnest around age 7. One might conclude that Belichick started his deliberate practice as a coach at this time. This deliberate practice initially occurred when Belichick started attending football practices with his father, who coached football at the U.S. Naval Academy. The young Belichick’s enthusiasm for understanding the game of football quickly became evident to all the coaches at the Naval Academy and, around age 9, Belichick was informally being mentored into the role of a coach. It was around that age that Belichick was invited to attend film-breakdown sessions and player meetings. He also started traveling occasionally with his father on scouting trips, and other coaches would make an extra copy of the weekly game plan to share with him. One of the coaches recalls how Belichick, at age 9, took game plans back to his room and studied them to the point that he could recall and describe all of the plays.

Perhaps what most stands out in the early years of Belichick’s development, though, was his intense desire to learn about football coaching. This personal mastery — or drive — was noted by those around him to be quite uncommon among young people his age. For example, one of Belichick’s teachers recalls how, at age 12, young Bill already was talking like a coach, providing unsolicited scouting reports and game analyses to his coaches and teammates.

I consider the middle years of Belichick’s development to have occurred during his time as a college football player and his initial experience as junior member of multiple professional football coaching staffs while in his early 20s. Although not an exceptional college football player, Belichick used his playing experience as another opportunity to study the game and learn by observing his coaches. He knew by this point in his life that he was driven to pursue a life as a football coach. Halberstam does not provide any indication that Belichick had some clearly mapped-out long-term plan for how he would make a living as a football coach, but it is abundantly clear that Belichick was convinced that he would make it happen somehow.

At age 23, Belichick accepted his first professional coaching position unpaid, initially— as a film analyst with the Baltimore Colts. For the next four years, he worked for three different teams and immersed himself completely in football coaching. In a way, those years could be considered Belichick’s formal education in football coaching, somewhat akin to going off to college to earn an undergraduate degree in a career field. Halberstam notes how, during this time, Belichick spent virtually every waking hour of his day coaching, studying coaching or talking about coaching with other coaches. These middle years also laid the foundation for the greater opportunities that would come in the later years of coach Belichick’s talent-development journey.

Belichick quickly gained a reputation among the NFL coaching fraternity as somewhat of a football “genius.” His career really took off when he joined forces with then-New York Giants Head Coach Bill Parcells, a very different personality but another coach considered to be a “genius” in his own right. While Belichick was the quiet master of football strategy and teaching, Parcells was the colorful antagonist who excelled at motivating players and coaches to
push themselves to excellence. Belichick served as assistant coach to Parcells with the Giants for many years, and their team eventually won a Super Bowl championship.

Perhaps one of the most influential experiences of the later years of Belichick’s development as a coach was his first attempt as a head coach in the NFL. Although many consider his brief stint as head coach of the Cleveland Browns to be a failure, it forced Belichick to reflect on his approach to coaching at the NFL level and, in fact, contributed directly to his later success as the Patriots’ head coach. As one of my colleagues — an experienced football coach — noted when we discussed this book together, Belichick’s “Cleveland experiment” was perhaps a required period of messiness and complexity necessary for him to adapt and realize his potential fully as a head coach. After this challenging attempt as a head coach, Belichick found his groove as a head coach a few years later with the Patriots, where he continues to excel.

What is evident during the later years of Belichick’s development is his relentless quest for continual improvement and self-evaluation. Halberstam notes how Belichick continually seeks out advice from a small-knit and trusted cadre of football coaches, always trying to learn and perfect his strategies.

What lessons can coaches and coach educators take away from reading this book? I think the key lessons can be summarized in three guiding principles for becoming an effective sport coach.

1. Set aside time regularly for self-assessment and introspection. Bill Belichick and all the truly effective coaches I’ve met over the years are keenly aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and they focus on maximizing their strengths. They don’t try to coach like others. Instead, they focus on being themselves: a truly genuine coaching style. As Halberstam notes in the book, Belichick never played the role of a coach; he is a coach.

2. Practice the art of time management. Bill Belichick is notorious for his attention to detail and time management. In that way, he reminds me very much of another legendary sport coach: John Wooden, who also was renowned for his time-management skills. Put simply, coaches like Bill Belichick and John Wooden are masters of efficiency. That, too, is a learned skill, developed through years of deliberate practice; in Belichick’s case, through direct observation of how both his father and his mother led their lives.

3. Take a long-term continuous-learning approach to development. Through good fortune and deliberate planning, Coach Belichick participated from age 6 in learning networks with other football coaches. That lifelong commitment to self-improvement is perhaps best summarized in the way Halberstam describes how Belichick was viewed by others as a 24-year-old assistant coach with the NFL’s Detroit Lions: “The impression he made on his colleagues was almost universally favorable: open-minded, incredibly hardworking, absolutely committed to being a little better every day” (p. 122).

In sum, I highly recommend The Education of a Coach for any coach, from aspiring to seasoned, as an example of the commitment and mindset required to become an effective coach. Football
fans or not, readers will walk away from the book with a greater appreciation for the deliberate practice required to realize one’s potential as a sport coach.